**Series Overview:** In this series, Supporting Cast, we are looking at the lesser known yet vitally important characters in the Bible. We believe that every single person has a specific role to play in the story of God and it is only when we all follow God’s call that He can accomplish His work in the world.

**Week Overview:** This week we look at Stephen. He was the first martyr of Christianity. From Him We learn what it means to stand fast when persecution comes.

Outline

THP: Stand firm!

Scripture: Acts 7:54-60

Hook: Historical figures who were firsts.

Story of being the first

Body:

* Background of what was happening before Verses 54-60
	+ Fight with stephen and Sanhedrin
		- Who these characters are
		- What they believe
* Scripture and interpretation
* Stephen was martyred
	+ What can we learn from that
	+ What persecution we might face today
	+ What we should do when we face persecution
* Application
	+ Decide now, before persecution to stand firm.

Key

**THP,** Personal Story, Example, Scripture

We all know about some of the great firsts from history. Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the moon. Christopher Columbus, the first to reach America. Emilia Airheart the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic. The Wright brothers who had the first powered flight.

Have you ever been the first one to do something? The first person to turn the test in, the first to beat a new game, the first goal or point of a sports season, the first child born. We have probably all been the first at something in our lives. Here's a story from when I was the first.

\*story of when you were the first (good or bad)\*

From 1st - 12th grade I went to a crazy strict school. We had uniforms, mandatory haircuts, shoe requirements, and so much more. There were always times when people intentionally tried to push the rules. Back in the day there was a blue color of girls socks. In the student handbook there was no specification that it was restricted to females (even though it was obviously female wear. A guy started to wear the girls socks simply because he could. So after the rules were changed. Many rules have been changed over the years. However, I was the first to have a rule named after me. One day in literature class I realized I hated giving speeches. Every speech I listened to was so boring and bland. 30 students reciting the same poem by memory or giving a speech about the same book in a monotone voice got real old real quick. I decided that I was going to go all out for my speeches in class, and it became something epic. Students would pull out their phones to record my recite the same poem everybody else gave because they knew mine would be special.

What I would do is interpret the poems in my own unique way, or I would act out a speech in a dramatic format. When the poem talked about april showers I would spray silly string across the class. When my book report talked about the giant unable to stand sunlight I collapsed after walking past the classroom window. When the poem was about a girl the author was in love with I acted as if he was in love with 15 girls and could not decide which was his favorite. The laughs erupted and my grades sored. Other students started to copy what I was doing and I got to laugh with them as well. I got 98% on every speech and the classes loved every one. . The year after I had these classes a rule was added called the Harrison clause. It stated that the poems could not be interpreted or portrayed as something other than the authors original intention.

I was the first student to have a rule named after me other peoples actions had resulted in new rules, but my rule was named after me.

I was a hilarious first, but I was not a legendary first. While my name was in the rules, it has probably changed since then, and it is not the most impressive thing to be remembered by.

Our focus today is going to be on Stephen and Stephen was a very important first in scripture. And we don’t always give him the attention his story deserves like those famous firsts from history. His testimony is found in Acts 7:54-60. Stephen was a follower of Jesus and was one of 7 chosen to oversee the distribution of food to widows in the early church. He was known for being a “man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” and Acts 6:8 says he was “full of God’s grace and power, and performed great wonders and signs among his people. Those who opposed him would try to argue and debate with him but were no match for the wisdom he had from the Holy Spirit. So naturally, they accused him of blasphemy (which was punishable by death). Fast forward and now he is standing trial in front of the sanhedrin, which is an official council of Jewish leaders under roman rule. Basically Stephen spent time explaining how the Jews have a history of rejecting prophets and that is what they are doing to Jesus. Stephen finished off his speech by calling them murders and saying ““You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised” in verse 51. Circumcision was a religious practice of Jewish law that created a physical sign of their faith. So what Stephen means when he says your hearts and ears are uncircumcised is that they might look different on the outside, but they are nothing special inside. Their hearts are not like the heart of God and their ears would never listen to God. Stephen was right. They hated everything he said. That brings us to verse 54-60 which says

“When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

Pause Here, our man Stephen is going off on some powerful dudes now he’s saying he can see God, tells them to look, even though he knows they closed themselves off to the Holy Spirit, and really just makes things worse for himself. He was unwavering, unwilling to give up his position. Stephen stood firm.

So after the sanhedrin heard this “they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Stephen died because he would not back down from his faith. When a person dies because they would not back down from their beliefs and are killed based on them, they become a martyr. Stephen was the first martyr of the Christian faith.

He became a shining example for Jesus followers throughout history. He showed us what truly following Jesus meant. We have to be there will be people out there who will do anything and everything, even murder, to hold you back from Jesus. You are not likely to get killed for your faith in the US, but there are plenty of other types of persecution out there besides death. I want us to be like Stephen when we are faced with adversity. We need to **stand firm.**

\*tell a story of personal persecution/standing up for something/being steadfast.\*

I played soccer in school and have vivid memories of fear for one aspect of the sport, penalty kick defense. When you fouled the other team you make a wall in front of the ball so they can't shoot straight into the goal, and you don't move. You stand still and take a ball to the face if you have to. When the ball was about to be kicked our coach would yell out “Stand firm!”

**Stand firm** means to refuse to abandon one’s position or belief. It is the action verb of being steadfast.

This is a small example of standing firm. However there are so many more examples in the lives of chirstians all around the world today.

There are going to be moments in your life where you will feel types of persecution and you will need to **stand firm**. Some of the most common ones you will face in America will be people saying you are less intelligent for your beliefs. You WILL be called names: a homophobe, or that you hate different people groups, call you racist, or a loser. Friend groups might leave you. People WILL hate you. You might even be faced with a moment like Stephen where you are killed because of your faith. It still happens all the time today.

What you need to know is those things they say are not true. Having religious beliefs backed with evidence you find compelling is intelligent. Jesus followers give love not hate. We love people no matter what race, gender, sexual identity they have. We love people regardless of how they feel about us.

One day something like this is going to happen, maybe you are already experiencing it and some of your friends are choosing to walk a different path then you and they're starting to not like you because of the faith you have. You will need to make a decision to choose God or have people like you. Choose to **stand firm** in your faith.

Stephen could have chosen to have the people like him by just saying what they want to hear. He chose the truth and died for it. Are you willing to lose some friends over it? Are you willing to be called names over it? Are you willing to be outcast from your family for it? Are you willing to take a stand for what you believe in no matter the cost?

Are you going to have a moment like the great firsts of history? You can choose to do the great thing when adversity comes your way. We know what the right thing to do is. We stay firm in our faith and we forgive those persecuting us even in the midst of persecution just like Stephen did. Decide today what you are going to do when that persecution comes. You are going to choose one of two options. You are either going to choose to please people and make them happy. Or you are going to choose God and your faith. **Stand firm!**

Scott - My favorite part of this story is that Stephen sees Jesus STANDING at the right hand of God. We hear occasionally stories about Jesus sitting at God’s right hand. But this is the only time in scripture we hear of Jesus STANDING at God’s right hand. What Stephen did was so notable that even Jesus stood up! Was it out of respect? Was it to take notice? Was it to encourage Stephen to keep going? I don’t know. But my life’s ambition is to do something so incredible for God’s Kingdom that Jesus STANDS to take notice. This guy is sort of lost to many people, but you can bet that he is remembered by God!

Kylee: I like this idea of “stand fast”. I think it’s important that you point out the realities of persecution in today’s world as similar to what people in the Bible experienced but also noted the reality that our persecution in America is different. Two thoughts…(1) I think you could develop the character of Stephen a little bit more. I like the background you give and how you explain his importance to the story, however, I think explaining more about Stephen’s past, his willingness to follow Jesus, and how monumental his stoning was could further drive home why he is a Supporting Cast member. (2) I think the THP could come sooner. If you throw the THP up in one of the earlier paragraphs I think it casts vision for what the rest of the message is going to be directed towards.

Thanks for covering a tough topic! I think this message is really important.

Kent - I need to get some more of Stephen, Kylee mentioned it… I want to get to know that character more if there is a way to do that! I think this message could come to a specific moment/challenge for students. Opportunity to stand and pray for each other… to hold up each others hands to pray or something like that. This message should hit home with older students who have experienced some push back in regards to their faith. Personal stories are great and will help bring the message home. Could be a good opportunity for a student story if a campus has one to share. I think we need to change the THP to Stand Firm… Hold Steady… or something like that… I don't think Steadfast works with every use in the script.

Aaron: A concept that could be worth digging into, especially at the end, is the contrasting the fear of God and the fear of man. Asking the students who they would rather please, and who they are more afraid of. This type of faith comes from having a healthy fear of God.

Micah: I agree with Aaron, I think there’s some tension you could lean into more at the end of the script. Make that a moment, hold it in the balance for the students to choose--who are they going to obey? I also think stand firm makes more sense than stand fast. I see what you’re saying but without context, it’s difficult to wrap my head around the idea of stand fast rather than firm.